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TRADITIONAL AND MODERN PATTERNS OF SUCCESSION TO POLITICAL OFFICE AMONG THE MOSSI OF THE VOLTAIC REPUBLIC*

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643 A characteristic of kingship shared by early European monarchies and many African societies has been the hazardous interregnum. In Europe this period was a time of shifting loyalties, intrigues, and bargained alliances; and the people's cry "the king is dead long live the king" was uttered without pause as if to abolish a hiatus that made them uneasy. The European monarchy later developed a strength and stability which enabled a king to pass on succession quietly to his heir. In African societies where the political power of the court was not strong, and the line of succession was not clearly delineated, the attempt was made to avoid a hazardous interregnum by keeping the people ritually ignorant of the death of a king. Only when the electors were ready to choose his successor were the people told of their monarch's demise. Even then, there was some real or ritual violence as the [662 609] numerous candidates vied for the vacant office.[1] Africans have themselves interpreted these stormy interregnums as being valuable for their societies. According to Oberg, in the Ankole Kingdom of Uganda, "The Bahima demanded that the strongest of the king's sons should be their leader and that the test should be one of war. The brothers must fight among themselves until one of them alone remained alive in Ankole Kingdom of Uganda to claim the drum and the mugabeship."[2] Other African populations believed that violent interregnums served to convince the people that a ruler was necessary. The Mossi of the Western Sudan was one of those societies which had a difficult interregnum. In this paper I shall try to show that this pattern coinciding [121] as it did, with a flexibility of succession to power among the ruling group, enabled this population to elect capable rulers before European conquest, helped them to insure the continuity of the ruling dynasty under European domination, and is now serving them in good stead during a period of transition to effective independence

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during a period of transition to effective independence.

The Mossi have the unique distinction of having preserved their ethnic identity and political autonomy throughout all the vicissitudes of Sudanese history until conquered by the French on September 1, 1896. The origin of Mossi society is couched in mythological terms. According to their tradition they came from Dagomba in the Gold Coast (present day Ghana) sometime during the 11th or 12th century and moved northward towards the Niger River. During this migration they carved out three large kingdoms and many small principalities by conquering and absorbing some of the indigenous Ninisi and Foulse and Dogon populations, and by chasing the others into the cliffs of Bandiagara. In 1328, according to Es Sadi in the *Tarikh es Soudan*, the Mossi attacked, burned, and sacked Timbuktu, then held by Mali, and during the following century attacked Walata and Banku. They received their first setback by the Ali, and were severely beaten by Askia the Great, the usurper of the Songhoi throne, who lead a *jihad* against them in 1499. But their attacks into the Niger bend did not cease until the Moroccans became masters of Timbuktu sometime in the early 1590's. From that period until the French conquest, the Mossi remained relatively quiescent. They developed and maintained an economy based on grain cultivation, livestock rearing, cotton production, and trade between the forest zones and the desert. Their political system crystallized into a loose confederacy of fairly autonomous kingdoms and principalities, sometimes tribute to the Moro Naba, the ruler of Wagadougou.

Wagadougou, the most important Mossi political entity, was like the lesser kingdoms, pyramidal in political structure. At the top was and still is the Moro Naba, a lineal descendant of Wedraogo, the Dagomba conquerer who founded the Mossi group and Moro Naba Wubri, the first ruler of the Wagadougou dynasty. Paying allegiance to him, were the princes who ruled such autonomous provinces as Yako, Boulsa, Mane, Riziam, and Boussouma. These princes were all sons or near relatives of the early Moro Nabas. Directly under the Moro Naba were district chiefs who were descended from the cadet branches of the ruling family. The villages within the district were in turn ruled by the chiefs of the indigenous populations. In many of the villages,

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643 the sons of the ruling family, the *nakomcse*, formed a noble class, above
565 classes of commoners, serfs, and slaves. Classed among the commoners in many villages were the descendants of former district chiefs who had been deposed by the Moro Nabas. The reason that the rulers gave for the deposal of district chiefs was always disloyalty; but everyone recognized that this was an excuse whereby the reigning sublineage deposed older branches and provided positions for its cadet or collateral branches.

631 The governing hierarchy of the Mossi was a lineage with its com-
613 ponent minor and minimal branches. Like most lineages, this ruling lineage possessed an ideology that all of its members had equal access to its corporate assets. The most important asset of this lineage was, of course, its sovereignty, its right to rule. The *nam* is the symbol of Mossi sovereignty and is described by them as "that force of God which enables a mere man to rule over other men." The *nam* was the possession of Wedraogo, the group's founder, and of Moro Naba Wubri, the first ruler of Wagadougou, and this possession became the patrimony of all their descendants. This being the case, the ruling chief of any village, district, principality, or kingdom did not own the *nam* of that area; he was considered the temporary holder of it, and on his death it reverted to the collective descendants of the royal ancestors.
428 A man did not have the right to pass the *nam* on to any person because
424 it was not his. Whenever a Mossi chief was being considered for office his commoner electors asked him the following questions: "Before his death, did Naba X designate anyone to replace him as chief?" This question was asked three times, and the candidate responded three times: "No! The Naba did not designate anyone. You may name anyone you wish; even if he is a blind man or a leper."

In actuality, this vaunted equality of access to the *nam* by all members of the ruling lineage was a legal fiction. And despite the fact that all the nobles declared that they could go to Wagadougou to seek the *nam* whenever a chief died, in reality only the members of the dead chief's minimal lineage (often the descendants of his grandfather) presented themselves as candidates. Indeed, of all the candidates, the eldest son of the dead ruler was the one most often chosen to be

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chief. If he was not qualified then one of his younger brothers, or one of father's brothers or uncles was chosen. Yet, the fiction of equal access to the *naam* was important to the Mossi because it enabled them to adhere to their most important political axiom which was that "The only man who should rule is one who can keep the country." Regencies were avoided, and persons with physical and character defects were barred. Moreover, this flexibility gave the electors a wide choice of candidates from which to choose the person best fitted for chieftainship at any given period. The Mossi have always believed that it is difficult to rule men and this is what they mean when they declare: "Nanamsè toumdè ya yida fa fa"—"The work of the chiefs is the most difficult of all."[3] For example, it does not seem like an accident that the first ruler, Moro Naba Wubri, was succeeded by four of his brothers in turn instead of by his sons. The Mossi had not completely conquered the territory, and the young sons were incapable of handling the complex political situation. The graves of each of the successors to Wubri in different parts of the country remain as markers to testify to the difficult task which the early rulers had in controlling their realm.

The Mossi believed, and still do believe, that it was only when conflict developed after a ruler died, that the people realized how necessary and valuable a chief was. The death of a chief, especially of the Moro Naba, was kept a secret until the war minister arrived at the capital with his troops. Only then did the cry go up: "The fire has gone out!"; and as soon as it was heard, violence broke out throughout the land. Prisoners were released, thieves rifled the markets, and the *nakomcse*, or nobles, rode about the countryside doing whatever they wished. This custom persisted as late as 1942. Reporting to his superior in Abijan about the events that transpired in Wagadougou when Moro Naba Kom died, the French commander wrote: "On Friday, March 13, 1942, young people, profiting from old custom, tried to steal things, but they were stopped and about one hundred were arrested."[4] Throughout all the chaos which attended the death of a king, the war minister remained calm unless an attempt was actually made to seize power. He never attempted to stop the public disorder or to catch thieves or murderers, because everyone believed that out of

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696 all the chaos would come a new appreciation for the task of the chief, and a cessation of the grumbling that the chiefs were greedy.

662 The Mossi interregnum also served another purpose. It gave the
428 electors the opportunity to exhaust and redistribute much of the patri-
666 mony of the dead ruler, which was brought to them by his heirs who were trying to obtain the chieftainship through bribery. Sometimes, a candidate's ability to collect a great deal of goods with which to press his suit often revealed to the electors the strength of his following in the district or village, for had he been an unpopular man he would have had to use only his own resources.

666 The Mossi electors were always concerned with the health and
643 character of a potential chief, and turned down the most promising
175 candidates who were deficient in any of these qualities. For example, when Moro Naba Sanum died in 1890 without leaving a male heir, his younger brother, Bokary Koutou, was the strongest candidate for the *nam*. Yet he was passed over, at first, by the electors because of his reputation as a bandit and a rebel. We know from Captain Binger, a Frenchman who met Bokary in 1888, that this prince was indeed a bandit and a slave raider. But Binger, although deploring Bokary's conduct, exonerated him on the grounds that the Moro Naba had sent him into exile without any means of support. This was true, but the
[687] reason that Moro Naba Sanum did so was because Bokary had raised a rebellion against him as an attempt to obtain their father's position. Bokary was forbidden to appear in the capital; but when he heard that his brother Sanum was dead, he took a force of soldiers and hurried to Wagadougou fearing that an attempt would have been made to prevent his election. When he found that his fears were justified, he became
[669] desperate and secreted a force of Gurunsi warriors around the elector's meeting place, threatening to kill them if he was not named Moro Naba. They succumbed to his threat and he received the *nam*. During
643 the customary speech in which a new ruler chose his official name,
175 announced his program for the people and the country, or ridiculed his erstwhile competitors, Bokary Koutou said: "A hundred ghosts cannot frighten an elephant (Wobogo)," meaning that he was not afraid
648 of any of his enemies. He thereafter became known as Moro Naba
721 Wobogo, and he chose to live up to his boast when the French arrived
175 and asked him to sign a treaty of protection with them. He refused

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and chose to fight, and when defeated, fled to the Gold Coast (Ghana). From here he intrigued with the British against the French and even succeeded in having his brother poisoned for accepting the title of Moro Naba. It was only when the British accepted French sovereignty over Mossi country that Bokary accepted his deposition and permanent exile.

Once the traditional electors had chosen one of Bokary's younger relatives, Siguiri as Moro Naba, the Mossi people themselves quietly accepted French rule. Their behavior was in this respect similar to that of many indigenous populations with complex political institutions who had been conquered by the Europeans. In contrast, the neighboring Dogon, Gurunsi, and Lobi, whose political systems were very simple, and who had been constantly raided by the Mossi for slaves, kept on rebelling against French rule, and in some cases shot poisoned arrows at French tax collectors and labor recruiters as late as 1941. The only opposition which they offered the French was in 1910 when an attempt was made to reorganize the Mossi districts for administrative reasons. However, when the French changed their policy of direct administration to a form of indirect rule, the Mossi remained so peaceful that by 1922 there was only one administrator for every 60,000 inhabitants.

Moro Naba Kom who reigned from 1905 to 1942 skillfully preserved the power of the ruling dynasty during a period when the Mossi people were subjected to a rather severe forced labor regime. This was also a period during which the administration deposed chiefs who ran afoul of its wishes or policies. The political ability of this ruler is best exemplified by the order of succession that occurred in the Doulougou district. In 1895 Moro Naba Wobogo had appointed his own son as Doulougou chief in place of Koabga Wedraogo whom he had deposed and killed. However, when Wobogo fled from the French the next year, his son, the Doulougou chief, killed himself because he did not wish to follow his father into exile. The new Moro Naba Siguiri placed a son of the former district chief, Koabga Wodraogo, as chief of Doulougou. This chief died in 1906 and was replaced by a brother. Unfortunately this chief ran afoul of the French, was deposed and placed in "obligatory residence" in another district where he died in 1927. The Moro Naba then elected another son of ex-

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643 Moro Naba Wobogo as chief of Doulougou, but this chief was assas-
636 sinated. Thereafter the Moro Naba placed his own brother as chief
175 of Doulougou district only to have him deposed by the French in 1932
662 for abusing his power. Now the Moro Naba again turned to a descendant of Koabga Wedrago and named him chief, but the French also deposed and jailed this chief for incapacity. Finally in 1935, the Moro Naba named his own son, Etienne Kongo, as chief, and this man was still chief when I left the Mossi in 1957. The interesting feature of this succession is that the Moro Naba confined it to three specific families: his own, that of ex-Moro Naba Wobogo, and that of the ancient chiefly line of Doulougou. In no case did Moro Naba Kom attempt to elevate to chieftainship the son or relative of a man whom the French deposed. He named a chief from another one of the chiefly families, and when a member of this line was deposed, he quickly turned to another one. In this way, the Moro Naba never gave the French any cause for thinking that he disapproved of their action by placing as chief a relative of the man they had deposed. This type of succession was only possible because of the flexibility in the Mossi mode of chiefly succession. Furthermore, the district people readily accepted the chiefs appointed by the Moro Naba because he never deviated from their cultural expectations, or violated the accepted norm of succession.

636 A more serious attempt on the part of the French to influence the
643 traditional political organization of the Mossi came when they tried to enroll the sons of the Moro Naba and those of other chiefs in a special school in order to make these boys adjuncts in their administration. The eldest sons of the Moro Naba and of the officials around Wagadougou were all sent to school because they were well known to the French.
636 However, in the rural districts, the chiefs hesitated to send their eldest
643 sons to school. First of all, they regarded this plan as another form of
186 forced labor from which their sons might never return. And secondly,
662 because they also feared that if these youths did return as educated men, they would have been Christianized, and thereby would have been unable or unwilling to perform the important roles which chiefs had vis-a-vis the ancestors. To palliate the French the chiefs sent their youngest or motherless sons to schools, or in some cases substituted the sons

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of their former serfs and slaves who were theoretically also "their sons." 636

The sons of the chiefs and those boys of commoner, serf, and slave 643 origins who had gone to the mission schools became the first group 186 of educated Mossi. The educated commoners had no function in the 662 traditional political system and were readily absorbed by the local French bureaucracy. However, since these persons were not sufficient to fill the administration's need of literate Mossi, the sons of chiefs and even the carefully coached missionary catechists were encouraged to join the civil service. The result of this policy was that almost no literate Mossi were elected to district and village chieftainship before the end of the second world war.

The relatively rapid political development which came to French 636 Africa as a result of the Brazzaville Conference of 1944 and the after- 646 math of the war presented the traditional Mossi political hierarchy with a grave problem: "Who should represent the Mossi people in the new French assemblies and councils both in Africa and in metropolitan France?" There were three possibilities: They could be represented by educated foreign Africans; by the educated sons of Mossi chiefs whose loyalties were not known; or by the potentially hostile educated Mossi commoners. The first hint of the Moro Naba's policy was re- 636 vealed when the Africans were called upon to select delegates to send 646 to the French Constituent Assembly on October 21, 1945. Houphouet 666 [Boigny], who anticipated the determination of the Mossi to support 662 their own candidate, had vainly taken the precaution of sending an emissary to the Moro Naba prior to the September 8 meeting [which the Africans had called to plan strategy]. The Moro Naba proved unamenable to the suggestion that he support Houphouet's candidacy, and insisted on backing one of his own loyals vassals, Tenga Wedraogo or Baloum Naba.[8] This action showed clearly that the Mossi had planned to use educated chiefs who could also represent them in the assemblies. The flexible pattern of Mossi political succession enabled the Moro Naba and his advisers to meet this new contingency. In three districts, Manga, Sapone, and Kaya, the eldest sons of deceased chiefs were passed over, and their younger educated brothers were elected to the vacant chieftainships. There were some hard feelings over the appointment of Sapone, but the reason given was that the new chief was partially blind in one eye. I have no data for the reaction of

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646 the Kaya people to their new chief. However, in Manga the proposed
666 election of a young chief over his four elder brothers did cause some
662 concern and talk about Catholic machinations because the nominee was of that faith. But there was no overt opposition to him once he had been elected. His elder brother accepted the wishes of the Moro Naba with good graces even though he remains a rather tragic individual.

643 The differential treatment that the Manga Naba receives from the
636 administration is obvious to everyone. Whereas the other district chiefs are still summarily summoned to the administrative center, and kept waiting, the Manga Naba sends his assistants to represent him. When the Governor of the Haute Volta came to Manga to make it an administrative subdivision, he was entertained by the Manga Naba while the neighboring district chiefs celebrated outside. It was the political power of this educated chief which was responsible for Manga becoming an administrative subdivision even though it is located several miles from the highway which runs between Wagadougou and Ghana. Furthermore, the population of the neighboring district all complain that Manga's population has gained a disproportionate share of all the services provided by the governmental agencies whose headquarters are there. The fears which the Manga people and the other Mossi have had over their chiefs being Catholic have not materialized in Manga. Of course, the Manga Naba does perform the rituals on the
[769] day of the ancestral feasts. These rites are now being performed by his father's brother who has become the ritual head of the ruling lineage (and it is possible that this line may become the line which performs this task for the now "secular" chief). However, when the
[797] chief celebrates the anniversary of his conversion to Catholicism at the mission, afterwards he holds court in his house where he receives from Catholics, Moslems, and pagans alike, the gifts he normally would have received in the feast of the ancestors.[8]

The most important function of such Mossi chiefs as the Manga Naba is to defend the interests of the Mossi people in the territorial assemblies and the French councils and assemblies while preserving the ruling tradition of the descendants of Wedraogo and Wubri. In his capacity as politician-chief, the Manga Naba joined a fellow Mossi of rather humble origin in sponsoring several bills in the Assembly of

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the French Union including one to build up the capital of Wagadougou. 643
At home he has taken an active interest in interdistrict politics, and has 636
acted as a liaison between his fellow traditional chiefs and the Mossi politicians of commoner origins. It goes without saying that he only supports those persons who are not opposed to the Moro Naba. As a matter of course, leading Mossi politicians fearing rebuffs from the district chiefs seldom visit any of the districts in the Manga subdivision unless they are accompanied and introduced by the Manga Naba. This kind of co-operation is what made it reasonable for a united block of political parties in Upper Volta, the Unified Democratic Party (Parti Democratique Unifie) to elect the late Moro Naba Sagha as it's honorary president before his death in 1956. At that time, the new party stressed the point that its action was guided by the fact that only the Mossi people had preserved their political identity throughout African history.[1]

The power of the traditional Mossi chiefs has been ably defended by their new politician-chiefs against those Africans who would relegate the institution of the chieftainship to ethnological musuems. The Manga Naba speaking before the Congress of Traditional Chiefs in Dakar in 1956 declared:

> Without wishing to direct any reproach to those who are demanding the abolition of traditional chieftainships, and who severely criticize institutions of whose value they are totally unaware, we ask them to beware of blaming the desert for the grain of sand which falls into the eye. We ask them not to compare the chieftainship instituted among them only a few years ago, chieftainship which perhaps has been imposed upon them, to ours which has existed for centuries.
>
> It is not our fault, if the manufactured chiefs among them have not known how to perform their tasks and have believed that to administer they had to resort to all sorts of extortions. One has never placed at the head of our villages, districts, provinces, or kingdoms persons who have come from elsewhere (former boys, stewards, cooks, or interpreters), because it could not be done. If in our country there are chiefs who are former civil servants [like the speaker, I must add] it is that they are persons who have inherited these positions according to custom, and in the places of their fathers, uncles, or brothers.

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643 636 We Mossi cannot say that the Europeans have introduced chieftainship among us; for we are old hands at it. Chieftainship has always existed among us, and we intend to conserve it in spite of anything one may say about it.

Who better than we chiefs can hope for a rapid evolution of our country? However, because of the pride we have [185] in the organized society that we have known well before French occupation, we wish this evolution to take place within our specific cultural pattern, to harmonize with, and to take into consideration the wisdom which has permitted us to conserve the integrity of our homeland until French occupation.

Without wishing to place ourselves against the demands of those who are wedded to an overthrow of local traditions, we endeavor to state our position clearly: Let everyone scratch whatever itches him.[8]

643 178 It is too early to predict what will be the fate of the traditional Mossi chiefs. The factors which made for such weaknesses in their political system—hazardous interregnums and flexibility in succession—have certainly ceased to operate. But, as I have shown, by a curious coincidence, a form of succession which evolved to meet a particular set of circumstances served the Mossi in good stead during French occupation, and is now being adapted to serve the needs of a new political environment. This flexibility in succession may even provide the Mossi with a wide enough choice of candidates to preserve the traditional ruling lineages in the face of a changing political system. Furthermore, this flexibility in political succession appears to be more compatible and less in conflict with the principles of universal suffrage which have been introduced in this society to serve the needs of the developing parliamentary system.

The growing use of Mossi traditional chiefs as modern politicians has not precluded the opportunity of Mossi commoners to take part in the governmental organization of the territory in which their group resides. As a matter of fact, there are a number of commoners who [556] are well educated, and individually have held high administrative offices. However, despite a number of them who have been critical of the traditional ruling hierarchy, they have not succeeded in breaking the strong hold of the traditional ruling lineage on the people. Some commoners have even found it to their advantage to ally themselves

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with the Moro Naba and his chiefs. The Mossi commoner who became Minister of the Interior in the Mendes-France government received the treatment fitting to his rank from French officials in Africa, but he bowed humbly and paid homage to the Moro Naba when he visited Wagadougou. In return he still receives political support from the traditional Mossi hierarchy. Whether or not this man and the other Mossi politicians of commoner origin will continue to honor and respect the chiefs in order to obtain their support is not known. It is possible that this situation will change if the growing number of urban Mossi and some of their rural fellows attack the position of the chiefs. But for the foreseeable future it appears as though the traditional dynasty will remain in power, and may even extend its power at the expense of the other non-Mossi groups who are now members of the Voltaic Republic.

The apparent success of the ancient political dynasty of the Mossi people to adapt itself to the requirements of the modern world shows the ability of African institutions to adjust novelty with tradition. It confirms what the anthropologists have always known, that Africa was not a *tabla rasa* on which conquerors could easily impose their ideas and institutions. The cultures of Africa were meaningful to its peoples and when they could not be maintained, they were reinterpreted to meet new situations.[9] It is quite true that because of historical reasons the Mossi did not come into as intensive contact with Europeans as did their neighbors to the south, and that this is possibly why their institutions have persisted. However, the experience of Ghana should make us pause before accepting such a facile answer. A British type of Parliamentary system was imposed upon that country, but it is changing so rapidly that one wonders whether it should have been imposed in the first place. It is still too early to tell what the Ghanaian and other modern African governments will look like; but one might speculate that within the bounds set by the exigencies of the modern world, these governments may resemble the traditional African ones much more than those of their ephemeral conquerors.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. According to C. K. Meek, among the Jukun "The King's demise was and is kept a close secret, and is not, in fact revealed until some months afterwards, when the body is formally buried. Various reasons are assigned for this secrecy, such as that

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103 114 the counsellors may have time to choose a successor, that bloody contests between aspirants for the throne may be avoided, or that the royal slaves and wives may not run off." (*A Sudanese Kingdom*, C. K. Meek. London, 1931), p. 166. Among the Banyoro of Uganda, "When the King died, it was not made known for some days and only those in attendance knew that death had taken place, that, as they said, "Kutura," he "slept." (p. 21). And although there was some understanding as to who should be chief there was fighting between the different princes. "The fighting among princes might last only a few days while sometimes it would go on for weeks and even months." (p. 124) (*The Bakitara of Banyoro*. John Roscoe. Cambridge University Press, 1923). Among the BaVenda, "None of the people are informed of the death of the chief, but when some months have passed and the people begin to grow restless they are told that he has gone away; often a year or more used to elapse between the death of the chief and any recognition of it . . . It appears that during the interregnum any excitement or attempts at usurpation of power have time to work themselves out before the heir is installed; Everybody has a shrewd idea as to the true state of affairs, although no one dares to speak of it." *The BaVenda*, Hugh A. Stayt, London, 1931), p. 207.

113 2. "The Kingdom of Ankole in Uganda," by K. Oberg, pp. 157-158, in *African Political Systems*, edited by M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Oxford Press, 1940.

3. "An Analysis of the Political Organization of the Mossi People" by Elliott P. Skinner, in *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences*, Ser. II, Vol. 19, No. 8, 00 740-750, June, 1957.

4. Copy of Telegram in the Archives of I.F.A.N. at Wagadougou, Voltaic Republic.

5. *French West Africa*. Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, Stanford University Press. 1958, pp. 223-224.

6. "Christianity and Islam Among the Mossi," Eliott P. Skinner in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 60, No. 6, December, 1958, pp. 1102-1119.

7. Thompson and Adloff, *op. cit.* p. 177.

8. *L'Afrique Francaise*. Vol. 66, 1957, p. 21, Paris.

9. *Man and His Works*, Melville J. Herskovits, New York, 1950, p. 542 ff, and Joseph H. Greenberg, "The Influence of Islam on a Sudanese Religion," *Monographs of the American Ethnological Society*, Vol. X, 1946.